

## [Unable to Stage a Comeback]

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by

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### UNABLE TO STAGE A COMEBACK

"My early education was done at Atlanta University when they used to have a kindergarten there, and I stayed in that school until I reached the fifth grade. This was at the time that Atlanta University was an undergraduate school. The grades were not offered and I finished the rest of my elementary education at the Mitchell Street [/Public?] [/School?]. The old building that housed the school still stands , [?] but has been renovated and turned into apartments. I went back to Atlanta University after completing the eighth grade work and spent six years there. I had a four-year normal course and two years of college work. I didn't complete my college work on account of my mother not being able to finance me. I hate it that I was unable to continue in school because I had looked forward to a college education.

"During my summer months I [taught?] school in the county every year from the time I was first year until my graduation. I had to do this in order to be able to go back to school during the regular term. The first year I taught in the county I was only thirteen years old. Yes, this was at a very young age but I had always had every advantage of good schools and my parents helped in every way possible. My mother tutored me and, therefore, I was far advanced for my age. On the other hand, not many years ago the [/Superintendents?] in the counties accepted teachers who were still in the grades and unlike today, strictness

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as to classification was not so pronounced. Then too the teaching profession was not so crowded as it is now, so teachers were in great demand.

"I took the examination for this school in the county and was successful in passing the test. I ventured out and taught, quite successfully. I attribute some of my success to the fact that I lived with my cousin, also a teacher, who helped me with the problems that came up in school.

"I spoke of my advantages and my parents' hope for me in the educational field, and I am reminded of my grandfather who was so interested in education, not only for his family but the race as a whole, that he was one of the pioneers of Atlanta University. Soon after the War between the States and after the war clouds had cleared away there were a number of northern whites who gave up home comforts and lucrative positions to come South to devote their lives to the education of the Negro. This was a great humanitarian gesture and took much courage on the part of those brave men and women, for they did have a hard road ahead of them. This was entirely new, figuratively speaking, for the South, because heretofore Negroes were looked on as property. Their health and fitness to work were greatly considered because the strong robust ones were counted quite valuable to their owners. They had never given a thought to education for a Negro. In fact, they had prohibited the education of Negroes, who, until after Emancipation, were merely looked upon as machines. Well, when Atlanta University was first begun my grandfather was one who assisted in getting food and other necessities for the teachers. As a child, my mother used to tell me and my sisters, how grandfather had worked hard to support his family and gave generously to the teachers at Atlanta University who were paving a way for the education of the Negro. She said he would purchase his groceries on Saturday for his immediate family and then carry all he could to Atlanta University for the teacher. He sent his children there. He had four children, two sons and two daughters. Three of his children graduated from Atlanta University, one of whom happened to be my mother.

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"My mother as a great church worker and she was a teacher in the city schools of Atlanta. She also taught in one of the colleges in Atlanta. She worked as a city [patron?] for the City of [Atlanta?] until her health failed. All of mother's girls, four, finished from Atlanta University. She also had a son. My father was very industrious, as well as ambitious for his family. He felt that he could make better wages if he left [Atlanta?] and so he and mother agreed on this and he left. He was successful and secured a nice job, sent money to support the [family?] and saved a nice amount. When he felt that/ he had been away long enough he took a vacation and came home. On his way back home he was sandbagged, robbed, and died before he was able to return home. After his death mother had the responsibility of supporting five children. She did it beautifully. She lived to see her four girls graduated from Atlanta University. The son saw fit to stop school before he graduated, as he felt he wanted to go out and support himself and relieve mother of this responsibility. Mother, who had so much hope for her children, didn't want him to do this but , seeing him so set on it and he had gone far toward his education, she felt he could succeed and granted him permission to stop school. Mother had to sacrifice and struggle to rear us but she had faith in God and confidence in [herself?] and so she was successful.

"She and my father purchased property and she held on to this after father's death. The property was about paid for and we were practically out of debt when the fire of 1917 occurred. This fire destroyed everything we had, just swept away everything , and we were never able to come back from this disaster.

"The fire started in a small dwelling near fort and Decatur Streets, just a little shack. There didn't seem to be a much 4 significance attached to the fire at first. I was teaching at [this?] time at the Parochial School. I continued, my classes, although [some?] of the parents had become alarmed and came for their children, I permitted those to go whose parents came but not without trying to discourage them from taking their children out because I felt the fire would soon be over. The fire kept coming as though by leaps a and bounds. It was the greatest fire in the history of Atlanta. The fire continued to sweep the colored

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section and still the whites didn't seemed so concerned about it. On and on the fire swept with destruction in its wake and finally it reached the white section - Druid Hills. Then the City of Atlanta busied itself to stop the fire. Well, the fire had such a headway that it was necessary for houses directly in the path of the fire to be dynamited and houses was blown up. Of course, the entire fourth ward mostly inhabited by Negroes, was entirely burned before anything was done. It was said that two white men had started the fire and went from house to house putting something on the house and then that house caught. It was during the time we were in the midst of the World War an whether this was [?] or not I could not say with any authority but I do know two white men were in my house when I got home from my school. They asked if there was anything they could do to assist and soon afterwards my house was on fire. The houses that they didn't go in were not burned.

"Friends of mine came and moved everything I had on the sidewalk. Most of my furniture was destroyed by fire even after being removed from the house and the rest was lost. There were men going [around?] in trucks, picking up furniture off the street and the stuff that was taken up by those men was never recovered. I had a piano and typewriter that disappeared and I have felt that the men who went about the section that was burned 5 picking up the furniture, took the piano and typewriter. I shall never forget that fire. I lost practically everything that I had and , to tell the truth , I have never seemed able to stage a comeback.

"Men, or rather soldiers from Ft. McPherson were sent out to patrol the streets, directing the people where to walk because of live wires everywhere.

"The Red Cross did a splendid piece of work during that time. I worked with the Red Cross, helping to get homes for the people. The people of Atlanta were loyal and generous to the unfortunates. They took in as many as they could. It was nothing to see six or ten people in two or three rooms.

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"We used the card system keeping record of the homeless. We went from house to house, working long hours caring for the people. I had a certain number that I visited each day. My work was commended and , after the people were about restored to normalcy and the services of the workers no longer needed, I was given a bonus of \$25.00. I was paid \$10.00 a week for my services.

"Most of the people who were burned out were of meager means and lived in the southeast part of the city. There were just a few good livers who were burned out. Of course, this was true of my people but there were a number of white people who were in good circumstances who lost all that they had. Some of their houses were not only burned but dynamited.

"After the fire the city talked of building a park for the colored people in fourth ward but the people didn't want to part with their houses, which consisted of dwellings and little places of business. Of course most of the homes that were burned were replaced with apartments which ruined a good many homes of the colored people in the section of Cain , Hilliard, Highland Avenue and Felton Drive.

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[We?] didn't owe much on the home at the time of the fire but , having suffered this great loss, we had to start all over again. My mother never was able to be her real self after this disaster.

"Later, the section having been turned into apartment houses , we took the insurance money, \$2,500, and built an apartment. Lumber was high because of world conditions, being in the midst of the World War. After we built the apartment then along came adversities, as is the case following all wars. People were not able to pay their rent and we [nearly?] lost our home. We struggled along, however, until the Home Owners Loan Corporation was started and then I got a loan. At the time, to me, it was a life saver but after the HOLC took over, made various repairs , added this cost and that cost , and then

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revamped the value, we were in debt for \$6,000. I have regretted many a day since that I turned my home over to HOLC. The cost has nearly doubled. I got behind with my notes and the [HOLC?] took over the property to handle the rents. All the rents coming from the place and \$10 extra which I pay each month are turned over to HOLC. I hope some day the property will be clear and I can again have it in my charge. And do you know it is really a great problem to pay for a Home after it has been turned over to HOLC? I really don't see where it as been such a great help as it was expected when first started. In fact , they don't give as much consideration as a private realtor does and the interest is terrible. About half received from the rent and the \$10 I pay is [applied?] to principal , and the other goes for interest. Whenever I hear anyone talking about trying to get a HOLC on their property I try to discourage the [ideal?] for I know what fix I have been put in.

"I was born in Atlanta, and after completing school I was able to get work in [?] very good jobs. My first job, after finishing 7 school, was teacher in the Parochial School and I taught here ten years. After that I entered the business world. I worked in the insurance [work?] a number of years. I worked for the Standard Life Insurance Company. At that time one made very good in insurance. of course it was new to our people, as far as Negro ownership was concerned. It took hard work but the profit was good. The reason I did insurance work, it was a new adventure for women but the men, so many of them, were taken out of these jobs and sent to war. These men were sent to France and other war zones and a deal of their jobs had been taken over by women, as is the case at the time of any war. I worked as a clerk when first going into the work. My work was good and so pleased were the officials that I was made secretary of one of the departments , and I worked in the insurance field for ten years. In fact, I did this work until the [/Company?] failed. After this insurance company failed , I left Atlanta and went to Hot Springs, Ark. , where I worked two years. I had to come back to Atlanta because my mother's health failed and I had to be with her. I then got work in the Pioneer Saving Bank as cashier. [!]

"I didn't know anything about the [?] banking business but the [/Comptroller?] from down town was furnished the bank to train the workers. I left out one of my jobs and may as well

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mention it here. I worked as office secretary for the Y. M. C. A. , and this work gave out eleven months after I had started. I worked at the bank from 1932 until 1937. I gue guess I would still be working at the bank had not th the manager decided to put a relative of his in my place.

"I tried several places after loosing losing the job in the bank to get other private work but failed. As a last resort I made application for WPA work.

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"My first assignment was on the sewing project where I worked [severl?] several months , and then I was transferred to the library. This library is part of University Homes, one of the government projects.

"I enjoy the work as librarian quite a bit and hope that WPA will keep this as one of its projects. I would like to remain here. I have decided to take a course in library work so that , should there be changes wherein WPA will have to withdraw its help , I shall be able to take over for University homes.

"I don't know what I would have done had not there been a chance to work on WPA. Likewise I don't see what most of the folk would do if there was no WPA. It has given great numbers of people courage and self respect, wherein they wouldn't have had anything to look forward to.

"I like the work here in the library. It gives me a chance to help the young people who come in , and you would be surprised to know just how man people do frequent this library during the day. I do much toward directing the children as to the best books to read and it is interesting to note just how eager they are to read. One wouldn't believe it, perhaps, but let me show you my circulation for today. See, 94 books have passed through my hands today to tenants here in University Homes. We operate the library for the benefit of this project alone. I have noticed they certainly do have a reading people here and you know what they say about a reading man and that is 'A reading man is a full man.' I really

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like this work and hope I can stay on and on, because I feel there is much I can do here. "Well, I don't suppose there is anything else I could tell you , as I just haven't had a very interesting life. I do feel, however, that I have given you an idea of just why I am on WPA.

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I am here because I simply couldn't find any other work. Of course, there are hundreds and hundreds on for the same reason. There seem seems nothing else to do but WPA employment and if it would cease I don't know what the people would do. I notice the unrest and uncertainty cause caused by the recent ruling, releasing the workers who have been on WPA 18 months. Those people are desperate , most of them I know. They can't seem to find anything and frankly there isn't anything for them to do.

"I will have to stop now because I have to list and label all of those books you see over there. They just came in today.

"You must come in again to see me. I've enjoyed talking with you and wish I had something really interesting to talk about. I do hope you can get what you want from what I have told you, and it can be seen just why I had to get on WPA.